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ABSTRACT

As classroom use of the World Wide Web grows, teachers are searching for new standards for evaluating the quality of online resources. Yet by promoting traditional standards of "quality," teachers push students towards viewing the Web as they often view the library, as a place to get "correct" information to support their positions in research papers. This view of the Web as a repository of information reduces its value as an interactive medium. If teachers approach online resources from a standpoint of "use," the Web can be used in a more dialogic way, and almost everything found online can be valued in its position within a larger discourse. Resources can be valued not just for their "accuracy" or "authority," but for how they add different perspectives to an issue, or how their approach to a topic can be juxtapositioned against other resources. In this way, teachers can help students engage the Web in more interactive, synthetic, and creative research. Viewing online resources with a binary valuable/invaluable mindset devalues the communicative and dialogic natures of many online resources--the Web, newsgroups, e-mail discussions, etc.--and thus runs counter to strongly held beliefs about the social construction of knowledge. Only when teachers begin using the Web in a manner consistent with its dialogic nature and their social constructionist beliefs will they fully benefit from its potential for the composition classroom. (Contains five references.) (Author/CR)

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Valuing Usage over "Quality": Revising Our Evaluation Standards for Online Resources

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Abstract

As classroom use of the World-Wide Web grows, teachers are searching for new standards for evaluating the quality of online resources. Yet by promoting traditional standards of "quality," we push students towards viewing the Web as they often view the library, as a place to get "correct" information to support their positions in research papers. This view of the Web as a repository of information reduces its value as an interactive medium. If we approach online resources from a standpoint of "use," we can utilize the Web in a more dialogic way, valuing almost everything we find online in its position within a larger discourse. We can value resources not just for their "accuracy" or "authority," but for how they add different perspectives to an issue, or how their approach to a topic can be juxtapositioned against other resources. In this way, we can help students engage the Web in more interactive, synthetic, and creative research, rather than sending them online in search of "quality" materials they can easily slide into traditional research papers. Viewing online resources with a binary valuable/invaluable mindset devalues the communicative and dialogic natures of many online resources--the Web, newsgroups, e-mail discussions, etc.--and thus runs counter to our strongly held beliefs about the social construction of knowledge. Only when we begin using the Web in a manner consistent with its dialogic nature and our social constructionist beliefs will we fully benefit from its potential for the composition classroom.

Online Views of Evaluation

Perhaps appropriately, some of the best resources for evaluating online resources can be found online. While these sources vary significantly in their coverage and approach, most rely on traditional evaluation criteria like Authority, Accuracy, Objectivity, Currency, and Coverage. These evaluation criteria, for the most part, are

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quite similar to those which we apply to traditional print resources. Of course there are some adjustments to these criteria allowing for the online nature of the resources: Some sources note that authority must be judged both by an individual's own experience and position, and by the organization which is sponsoring the Web page, sometimes even calling into question the server or Internet service provider (ISP) which is housing the site on its server. A few sites go even further into Web-based criteria by asking readers to evaluate the appropriateness of links to other sources, the frequency of outdated links, and the levels of interactivity a page provides. This last reference--asking about interactivity--can potentially lead Web-users to look at a resource in a creative and dialogic way; unfortunately, the site listing this criterion (http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/instruct/critical.htm) does not encourage students to *use* these interactive features to contact authors, but only suggests it is a good thing to have on a site by asking, "Is appropriate interactivity available?"

Let's take a brief look at two of the more popular and useful sites as a way of examining how online sites approach the use of the Web in research.

A Student's Guide to Research with the WWW — Craig Branham, St. Louis University (http://www.slu.edu/departments/english/research)

This site is designed as a tutorial for composition students, providing evaluation criteria for various types of pages, then linking to a range of appropriate examples which the student may then evaluate as practice. The site then goes on to offer tips for conducting the searches that would lead to online sources in the first place. Overall, this site does not go into the depths that will lead students to develop truly critical evaluation skills, but it is an excellent place to start them in their questioning of online sources.

Types of sites: Informational, News and Journalistic, Advocacy, and Personal. Missing from this model is the rapidly growing commercial domain, leaving students guessing at how to evaluate this very prevalent area of the Web.

Evaluative criteria: Relevance, Authority, and Accuracy. Other criteria are embedded within these three, such as the reference to currency made within the "Authority" section.

Evaluating Web Resources — Jan Alexander and Marsha Tate, Widener University (http://www.science.widener.edu/~withers/webeval.htm)

This site goes into more depth than Branham's in its development of evaluative questions, but it is not written in a explanatory way; it simply breaks down the Web into types of sites, then lists six criteria and accompanying questions to ask under each heading. The site is designed as a resource for teachers, not as a tutorial for composition students, although they could easily navigate the site on their own. Alexander and Tate offer an array of example sites, categorized both by criteria and page types, as well as in a category they term "additional evaluation challenges."

Types of sites: Advocacy, Business/Marketing, Informational, News, and Personal.

Evaluative criteria: Authority, Accuracy, Objectivity, Currency, and Coverage.

Both of these sites, despite their differences, take the same judgmental and binary approach to site evaluation, suggesting a site is either a useful source or it is not. In fact, Alexander and Tate make such value judgments almost formulaic; at the top of each group of evaluative questions is the following statement:

Note: The greater the number of questions listed below answered ***"yes"***, the more likely it the source is of high quality. The questions in **Bold Type** must be answered ***"yes"*** for the source to be of value in your research.

Such a bold declaration of what is or is not worthy of being used as a resource truly limits the use of the Web, treating it only as a place to gather factual information like the kind we might find in a traditional library. Such a view of online resources, however, is quite common; we see very little or no discussion of how students may

engage in exploratory or dialectic research--or on how to represent their research as such--just on how to seek out library-like resources in a very un-library-like medium.

Print Views of Evaluation

When I began examining numerous composition textbooks for information about online resources, I figured I'd be able to break the books down into two rough categories: Traditional textbooks that have added on a technical component, and "new generation texts" that specifically focus on researching and writing online. As I examined all the books I had gathered, however, I realized that many of the "researching online" texts were just as guilty of treating the Web as a Big Old Library as were some of the more traditional and mainstream texts. My study is by no means comprehensive--that is a task for after my dissertation is complete--but my preliminary findings are still enlightening.

Perhaps the most common problem with texts is that they apply the same evaluation criteria to online resources that they do to print ones. Despite a good deal of promotional attention to its "Comprehensive Internet and Web coverage" (see http://www.smpcollege.com/13326X.html), the *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* has made very minor changes between its 4th and 5th editions in terms of evaluating resources. In its section "Reading Sources with a Critical Eye" (5th edition, p. 591+), the only changes are the addition of the words "or online" in one paragraph and the inclusion of one sentence asking researchers to discover who maintains a Web site as a way to analyze potential bias. I must admit, however, that the *SMG* does suggest that various Internet tools may be good places to start researching, to get a feel for the scope and shape of certain debates, or to ask for research help or reading suggestions. In that regard, Axelrod and Cooper view the Internet as a dialogic resource.

Several "online specialty texts," however, do not do much better in creating unique criteria for online resources. Harnack and Kleppinger's *online!*, for example, uses the very traditional criteria of Authorship, Publishing body, Referral to and/or knowledge of

other sources, Accuracy or verifiability, and Currency. In fact, much of this text is very handbook-like in its focus on research tips and documentation style; little attention is given to the interactive or dialogic potential of online research. (In *online!*'s defense, though, it *is* billed as a reference guide.) Far more direct about treating the Web as a Big Old Library, though, is Branscomb's *Casting Your Net*, a book spends well over a page portraying the Internet as an intellectual wasteland that lies somewhere between an afternoon talk show and the "town lunatic." Bransomb's focus is very much on searching the Web for authoritative "information," and he precedes his list of evaluation criteria by pointing out the similarities to evaluating print resources, adding that "you simply need to be more vigilant in applying your criteria" due to the lack of a filtering publishing process (13). Most disheartening to me, though, is the mantra he suggests to ensure a critical evaluation of all online resources: "Nothing on the Internet is true; nothing on the Internet is true..." (14). Yes, it will cause researchers to be critical, but such an approach also limits the dialogic potential of the Web, not to mention the implications it has for our students' own online writing.

Of the textbooks I examined, only two viewed the Web as a dialogic resource: *The Research Paper and the World Wide Web* by Dawn Rodrigues, and *Connections: A Guide to On-Line Writing* by Anderson, Benjamin, and Padres-Holt. While Rodrigues does use fairly traditional evaluation criteria for evaluating sources, she gives detailed notes on "Internet Applicability" for each one, making clear the differences between print and online uses of such standards. Further, and more importantly, Rodrigues promotes a more exploratory and dialogic approach to research, noting the value of browsing the Web with an open mind and letting various viewpoints and opinions guide developing thoughts. This approach is refreshing, particularly in a book with the term "research paper" right in the title. "The Web is more than a set of information resources;" she writes, "it is a way of connecting people" (31). It is this interactive and exploratory approach to research that takes advantage of the Web's true strengths. *Connections* is quite a bit different from most other books I examined, primarily because it emphasizes writing online, not using online resources to create print works.

The text includes chapters on MOOing, writing effective newsgroup posts, and designing hypertextual documents. So it is no wonder they take a far more interactive and synthetic approach to Web use than any of the other texts: "Research is about more than finding a few juicy pieces of information to help fortify a ready-made position. It's about brainstorming topics, narrowing the scope of the project, communicating with others, exploring alternative perspectives, soliciting feedback, and revising claims" (75). The authors call for researchers to explore the complexities of an issue, multiple perspectives, and "conversational resources of the Net" (75-76). This text does more to help students understand the potential of the Web than any other resource, since it focuses so much on a dialogic, synthetic, and creative approach to research, rather then the fact-finding missions so many other approaches take.

Classroom Application

Classroom application of this usage-based approach to online research is actually quite simple, but students often need to practice the synthesis and incorporation skills it involves. I discover most of my students want to simply drop facts, quotes, and citations into their writing without engaging the sources in any way, and this always is the biggest hurdle we have to cross in reconceptualizing research.

The first step I take is to encourage students to spend a good deal of time reading and talking to people before they really narrow their topic or settle on a thesis; I find that if they commit to a stance too early, they seem more determined to just find support for their viewpoint, rather than taking an exploratory approach in which they are trying to get a feel for the range of ideas within a subject or a debate. And I encourage them to talk to others--professors, classmates, local "experts"--because those discussions somehow help them value ranges of opinion and reinforce the dialectical nature of larger "conversations" on their topics. This stage takes time, sometimes so much that students start feeling pressured to decide on a specific thesis, but I feel that it is a valuable way to get them to move beyond fact-based research. And all the while, we can talk about note-taking, comparing and synthesizing viewpoints, and other matters.

The second step--which often runs concurrent with the first--is to talk for a bit about a range of sources. When I talk about range, I usually use some of the traditional evaluation criteria mentioned above to help them identify the "expert" sources, potentially biased ones, well-supported non-experts, and so on down the line to the unsupported viewpoint or rant. I draw a continuum on the board between "expert" and "non-expert," and then complicate it a bit more. There are many other factors at work here besides levels of expertise, but students understand what I mean; most recognize they could be experts in some areas--single motherhood, interracial dating, or athletics and diabetes--and be uninformed amateurs in others--nuclear disarmament, tax systems, or prison reform. . . yet they still had something valuable to say on those latter topics. Actually, a good way to help them see the ways information from a wide range of sources can interact is to have them do research in an area in which they consider themselves well-informed or experienced; they can examine how the experts' opinions help explain their observations and vice versa. That's a good way to help them start understanding a dialogic and synthetic approach to research.

The third step is to look at a sample range of sources, asking the students to discuss what a synthesis of these websites could look like. The one I like to use surrounds the topic of voodoo:

Virtual Voodoo

(http://www.voodoomuseum.com)

> This site is run by the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum on Dumaine Street in the French Quarter. I've been to this museum and other similar places while visiting New Orleans, and while they can prove educational, at times they seem more like souvenir shops for tourists and other curiosity seekers. This site's most recent version is very glitzy and uses Shockwave to present a somewhat impressive interface... far more developed than the simplistic page I saw the first time I visited the site.

The Vodun (Voodoo) Religion

(http://www.religioustolerance.org/voodoo.htm)

This page is maintained by the Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance and presents a fact-based historical and cultural explanation of voodoo. The page is rather encyclopedic and is the type of "information" students often like to find for reports.

Demystifying Voudou

(no URL available; site reorganized)

This page is a *Chicago Tribune* story about a 1997 exhibit at the Field Museum of Natural History called "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou." The story describes the exhibit's very artistic and spiritual view of voodoo, one that seems to counter that of the Voodoo Museum and adds a more refined credibility to interest in this religion and culture. Note: The *Tribune* reorganized their site recently and apparently removed such older stories from their archives.

So what do students talk about when attempting to synthesize the sites? Most talk about the popularity of anything that seems so "other" to us, and some discuss our almost pop-culture fascination with what we see as mysterious and dark. And some spent far too much time shopping at the Voodoo Museum's collection of voodoo dolls; they scared me. Students have fun with the range of sources and do well to see connections between sites that would receive very different treatment from many of the criteria noted above.

I've also done such comparisons on the topic of cults, particularly after the Heaven's Gate incident a few years ago. We synthesized a mirror of the Heaven's Gate website, a newsgroup discussion by former cult members, and the site of a religiously-based group that seeks to rescue and deprogram cult members.

The fourth step is to move them online to start looking for a range of sources, and to practice imagining ways of using those sources and making them interact with other ones. I have them fill out the following chart for a handful of resources, preferably that match their topic.

Title and URL	
Author and authority (credentials, job, etc.)	
Affiliations and their implications	
Publication date and its relevance	
Arguments, support, proof, evidence	
Relation to other websites and/or sources	
Use in an essay (be creative in potential uses); Reasons it would be good for that use	
Other comments on this document's/ site's credibility and/or usefulness	

As students begin to work on their researched essays, I continually reinforce the synthesis of sources and encourage the use of a wide range of materials. Some students fall back into a library-like view of the Web, searching only for what they consider "expert" sources; others do a good job of using a range of online resources, synthesizing the various viewpoints they find online, and approaching their research and writing in a very dialogic way. And those that do adopt a dialogic approach to their research and writing typically produce very engaging, creative papers, far more insightful and interesting than the "reports" that so often cross our desks.

So what does all this mean? Why bother taking so many extra steps to encourage a dialogic approach to research, especially that done online? The Web is a dialogic and interactive medium, far beyond the traditional library. If we wanted to make a more complete web-library analogy, we'd not only have to value the books in the latter place,

but also its guest speakers, hallway conversations, scribbled notes, and even bathroom graffiti. In order to take advantage of this fullness of the Web, we need to help our student practice exploring and synthesizing all it has to offer. On a more theoretical scale, though, these practices force us to connect theory to practice in our teaching; if we are to continue proclaiming our theoretical beliefs in social construction, intertextuality, and dialogism, we need to take steps such as these to make the theory come alive for our students.

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